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7 September 1967

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MEMORANDUM FOR: The President  
The White House

SUBJECT : The Kissinger Project

The Exchanges with Hanoi

1. The approach to Hanoi through Kissinger's contacts in France was made in two phases. The proposal was first broached informally during a visit to Hanoi on 24 and 25 July by two French intermediaries, who carried a general message of US interest in negotiations. The approach was intended to assure the North Vietnamese leaders of our willingness to stop bombing the North in return for some assurance that Communist forces in the South would not be reinforced. The North Vietnamese premier expressed interest and told the intermediaries that an unconditional end to the bombing would lead promptly to negotiations. He said Hanoi would prefer a public statement but would "settle for" a de facto cessation. The premier did not commit himself on the issue of resupply of Communist forces in the South.

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2. In August a more precisely worded message was formulated in consultation with Washington and was presented by the same intermediaries to Hanoi's diplomatic representative in Paris. This second message, which was cabled by the North Vietnamese to Hanoi on 25 August, expressed US willingness to halt the bombing "with the understanding" that this would lead quickly to productive talks, either in secret or publicly announced. It also stated our "assumption" that Hanoi would not take advantage of the cessation of airstrikes. The message further suggested that if Hanoi wanted to preserve the secrecy of negotiations, it might prefer that bombing operations be reduced rather than ended abruptly. To lend authenticity to the message, it was accompanied by an assurance that the immediate Hanoi area would not be bombed for a period of ten days--24 August to 4 September.

3. When the bombing restriction expired on 4 September, no response had been received from Hanoi, either to the US message or to the request of the French intermediaries to return to North Vietnam for further discussion. Hanoi's Paris representative asked the intermediaries to contact him again on 6 September

for further word. The bombing restriction meanwhile was extended through 7 September.

Analysis of Hanoi's Reaction

4. Hanoi may not have taken seriously the first approach through this channel in view of its "unofficial" character. The authenticity of the second message, however, can hardly have been mistaken. There are several possible reasons for the North Vietnamese delay in making a clear-cut response to the US proposal. Hanoi may well have concluded that the message signified no real movement in our position toward its requirements of an unconditional halt to the bombing. The reference to our "assumption" that Hanoi would not capitalize on the cessation to reinforce Communists in the South may have been misconstrued as a condition or as a demand for reciprocal action. Moreover, the suggestion that a limited de-escalation of the bombing would preserve secrecy more effectively than a sudden cessation could have been interpreted by Hanoi as a US "trick" to sidestep the North Vietnamese demand for unconditional action.

5. Another reason for Hanoi's silence so far may relate to timing. The second message came shortly

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after an intensified bombing effort against Hanoi, was delivered during an unofficially declared lull in such strikes, and carried the implication of renewed attacks at the end of ten days. North Vietnamese leaders may have viewed this sequence as a not too subtle attempt by the US to apply the carrot-and-stick technique. In addition, much has been going on during this period, including the North Vietnamese national anniversary celebrations and the elections in South Vietnam. These distractions, added to the difficulties of making a collective decision on so controversial an issue as negotiations, could have made ten days look like a short time to the Hanoi leaders. It is worth noting that in the Tet bombing pause last February, Hanoi complained vigorously about the limited amount of time it was given to answer President Johnson's message. In any case, the setting of a deadline for acceptance would be likely to have a counterproductive psychological impact on an antagonist who is confident of his ability to outlast his adversary.

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**Conclusion**

6. Hanoi's failure to date to respond to the US initiative could well be related to a combination of factors of timing and interpretation, reinforced by its deep-seated distrust of US motives in the area. The tone of the premier's remarks to the intermediaries in July suggests a greater interest in getting talks started than we have noted in the past. This may represent merely a tactical shift, however, for we see nothing in his private statements or in his recent public pronouncements indicating a significant change in Hanoi's position. North Vietnamese leaders continue to insist on an unconditional stop to the bombing and a settlement based on their "four points." They show no sign yet of any readiness to compromise these objectives.